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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5466

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1902

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 001101

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINS PHUM KJUS KDEM ASEC MOPS TH

SUBJECT: CROWD CONTROL DURING RECENT PROTESTS IN THAILAND

REF: A. BANGKOK 983 (BRIEFING DIP CORPS)

IB. BANGKOK 974 (BANGKOK CALM)

IC. HOTR IIR 6 895 0221 09 (PROTESTS END)

ID. HOTR IIR 6 895 0216 09 (PROTESTS AT PATTAYA)

IE. BANGKOK 951 (SHIFT TO PATTAYA)

IF. 06 BANGKOK 7501 (POLICE REFORM)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

I1. (C) The Thai Army, rather than the police, played the leading role in quelling angry demonstrations in Bangkok April 12-14. The Thai government's decision to rely on the Army may have stemmed from several factors, including the political views of leading Army and police officers, as well as lack of confidence the police would take the actions necessary to restore order on the streets. The failure of police officials to prevent demonstrators in Pattaya from disrupting the ASEAN Summit April 11 may reflect poor planning or capabilities or a lack of will, but restrictive rules of engagement imposed by the Prime Minister likely exacerbated those factors; military units (navy and army) had also deployed in Pattaya and ultimately proved no more effective than the police.

I2. (C) We assess that the Thai police have a reasonable capability for crowd control. The military appears interested in expanding its crowd control capabilities, and at least one senior officer believed the Army's capabilities improved thanks to the U.S.-funded Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) training. It is unclear whether the police (or, if again involved, the Army) will in the future be more effective in containing protests; actions taken by security forces against political protesters will likely continue to reflect a combination of the rules of engagement dictated by civilian policymakers and the security forces' motivation, skills, and equipment. End Summary and Comment.

AFTER PATTAYA, ABHISIT TURNED TO THE ARMY

I3. (C) On April 10-11, thousands of anti-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) "redshirt" protestors converged on the seaside town of Pattaya, where Thailand was hosting a Summit meeting of East Asian leaders

(ref E). Despite forewarning in the form of public statements from UDD leaders expressing a desire to disrupt the Summit, both police and military officials at the site were unable or unwilling to maintain order. Demonstrators blocked key roads and entered a hotel complex housing visiting dignitaries, ultimately forcing the Summit's cancellation and leading to a severe loss of face for Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his administration. An Australian diplomat on site in Pattaya preparing to support the participation of the Australian PM told us that she took a photo of the Pattaya police chief strolling arm in arm with redshirt demonstrators the morning of April 11; the police chief was subsequently transferred to an inactive post.

(Note: When the UDD protestors pushed through military lines, the government had not yet declared a state of emergency in Pattaya, and the soldiers were under extremely strict rules of engagement. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) When the UDD then resumed demonstrations in Bangkok, Abhisit used existing provisions of Thai law to declare a state of emergency in Bangkok and surrounding provinces on April 12. Abhisit issued a directive that appointed Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban, a civilian politician, as both the "Authorizing Supervising Official" and as the "Chief Official" for "resolving the emergency situation." Abhisit gave Suthep "the powers to resolve the severe emergency situation in accordance with the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation" and to "(c)ommand and instruct relevant government agencies and officials..."

¶5. (SBU) Abhisit's directive also stated that "Police officers of the National Police Bureau, military officers and civil servants... shall be competent officials under the (Emergency Decree)..." (Note: In this context "competent

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officials" is a technical term meaning persons empowered by the Prime Minister to perform actions under the Emergency Decree.) Furthermore, "In cases where it becomes necessary... military officials shall assist in the operation (to restore order)."

WHY NOT THE POLICE?

¶6. (SBU) When former PMs Samak and Somchai declared similar states of emergencies in Bangkok in late 2008 in response to People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protests which occupied Government House starting in August and shut down Bangkok's airports in November, they chose alternate authorizing officials; Samak named the Army Commander, and Somchai named the Police Chief. In both cases, neither authorizing official moved to use force to clear the PAD crowds, in part citing the lack of a PM's order for them to do so.

¶7. (C) It remains unclear to us precisely how the RTG under DPM Suthep's direction divided crowd control responsibilities in Bangkok between the Army and the police April 12-14, but the Army clearly served as the lead agency for dispersing and containing crowds, while the police also remained involved. Speaking publicly on April 17, Abhisit explained his preference, referring vaguely to "some difficulties" which had occurred in 2008. Among the reasons why we believe Abhisit sought to give the Army the leading role:

- POLITICAL LOYALTIES: Both soldiers and police officials swear their oath of allegiance to the King, but in the current highly polarized environment, the Army has appeared staunchly supportive of the monarchy, while many Thais perceive the police as sympathetic toward former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a former police officer. As noted in ref F, during his time in office, Thaksin had increased the influence of the police, sometimes at the Army's expense. After Army leaders carried out the 2006 coup d'etat, the pro-military administration, as one of its many initiatives, made an unsuccessful attempt to carry out a

wide-ranging restructuring of Thailand's police force that would have diminished the institution markedly. We observed some low-ranking police officers enthusiastically participating in UDD protests.

- RISK AVERSION: The impact on the police of the public backlash following the October 7, 2008 clash between the police and PAD protestors should not be underestimated, in terms of plummeting morale and risk aversion in politicized situations. The PAD trumpeted the clash, in which dozens were injured, as a national trauma. There was widespread sympathy, including from Queen Sirikit, for a female protestor who died from the injuries she sustained. Several separate investigations ensued, though none have reached conclusion.

- CAPABILITIES: In the aforementioned October 7 confrontation, the police units involved demonstrated that they were not trained very well. For example, at least one police officer fired a tear gas canister directly into the assembled PAD supporters, rather than aiming above the crowd.

The police also seemed to have poor quality equipment; some critics alleged the Chinese-made tear gas canisters contained small amounts of explosives which detonated with lethal force. Abhisit remarked to the diplomatic corps on April 16 that, had the police been in charge of dispersing UDD protestors, they likely would have caused more harm to protestors than soldiers did (ref A).

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT KEY

18. (C) The growing issue of "risk aversion" cited affects not only the police, but also civilian officials. We believe it important to recognize that PM Abhisit and his subordinates imposed stringent rules of engagement during the recent protests. Written statements provided by the MFA to the diplomatic community noted:

- In an April 13 televised address, Abhisit "stressed that the most important guideline he had given to government

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officials responsible for resolving the situation was that the measures... shall not cause any deaths.... (T)he government will carry out measures based on non-violence..."

- In an April 13 televised appearance, Chief of the Defense Forces General Songkitti Jaggabatara announced that, in the restoration of order, "(n)o weapons will be used, except for self-defence, and measures will be imposed only when necessary and for a period required to resolve the situation.... Security officers are strictly instructed to use weapons in two manners only: first, live bullets are to be used as warning shots by shooting into the sky, and second, blank bullets will be used in cases where protesters advance upon security officers."

- In an April 19 televised address, Abhisit "reaffirmed that the policy guideline he gave to security officers involved in the operations to restore peace and order was for them to exercise utmost restraint and avoid any use of force."

19. (C) Given the extraordinarily politicized environment and the strict rules of engagement, we believe that the most recent police attempts to contain UDD demonstrators did not reflect the full extent of police capabilities. While a DAO officer observed that the police offered minimal resistance to protestors in Pattaya, military units from the navy and army, under strict rules of engagement, as noted in para two, above, also were present at the Summit site and similarly failed to impede protestors (ref D).

POLICE AT THE EMBASSY - JOB DONE WELL

¶10. (C) RSO has been satisfied with the police's crowd control actions at the Embassy (on the rare occasions when it is required), as well as with other police efforts to protect our mission. During a recent demonstration in front of the entrance to the Chancery, several hundred protestors were contained but permitted to exercise their right to demonstrate regarding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The police ensured they had barriers and sufficient officers to send a clear signal of control. The RSO section has exceptional relations with Special Branch police, the Bangkok Metropolitan Police, the police SWAT operation (which has received USG training), and each individual police precinct that has a connection to any of our people or residences.

¶11. (C) Recently, in light of the ongoing political crisis, RSO requested the Diplomatic Security bureau's Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) program consider offering training on crowd control. ATA does not currently offer such a course, and RSO is seeking to devise a course in-house, seeking input from various U.S. police organizations which have dealt with this problem and from other foreign missions. (So far, the RSO has only had operational, technical and philosophical discussions with the police on crowd control.)

ARMY CROWD CONTROL CAPABILITIES

¶12. (C) Many observers -- including even a UDD co-leader (ref B) -- believe that the Army acted with appropriate restraint and discipline when containing and dispersing UDD protests. (Ref C reports a DAO officer's observations.) The troops involved were infantry soldiers from the First Army Area. DAO personnel have in the past observed Thai soldiers training for crowd control with appropriate gear, such as shields, batons, and water cannon trucks. Not surprisingly, however, the Army appears to lack the equipment for troops to handle large crowds engaged in simultaneous demonstrations at multiple sites. Nevertheless, DAO observed during the recent Bangkok demonstrations that the Army's forceful presence, including the visible deployment of light infantry weaponry (such as vehicle-mounted machine guns), had an intimidating effect that likely made protestors less willing to confront the troops than they might have been to confront police.

¶13. (C) Lieutenant General Surapong Suwana-adth, Director of Joint Intelligence at the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, told the Defense Attaché Corps after the recent demonstrations that the Army, in its crowd control actions,

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benefited from Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) training it had received. Surapong told us this training had proven very useful, allowing the Army to engage protestors in a disciplined manner, and the Army intended to pursue further such training. (Note: We understand that GPOI training does not specifically aim to prepare troops for the role they played in the recent Bangkok disturbances, but some GPOI training entails checkpoint control, and control over crowds in a military mission environment using normal military equipment such as flak vests and weapons, rather than specialized crowd control gear. End Note.)

¶14. (C) A British Embassy officer told us recently that Chief of Defense Forces GEN Songkitti intended to travel to the UK in the near future and would discuss a potential purchase of riot control equipment. (The British Embassy officer was unsure whether his government would look favorably on such a potential sale.)

JOHN